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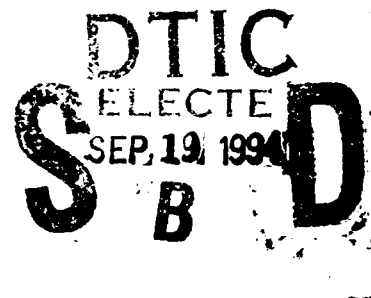
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The Mahdist Revolution

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This paper covers the Mahdist Revolution in the Sudan from 1881 to 1885. Mohammed Ahmed proclaimed himself the Mahdi (the expected one or the deliverer in the Islamic faith), and fought the colonial Egyptian government of the Sudan and the British. Britain was drawn into the conflict by its interest in the Suez Canal, its heavy financial investments in Egypt, and its participation in supressing the Arabi revolt.

Mohammed Ahmed successfully defeated the Egyptian and British forces brought against him and established an Islamic state in the Sudan. He succeeded by effectively combining religious, economic, cultural, and military strategy under charismatic leadership.

Mahdi, Sudan

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THE MAHDIST REVOLUTION

A Thesis presented to the Faculty of the U.S. Army  
Command and General Staff College in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

by

ROBERT N. ROSSI, MAJ, USA  
B.S. Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, Florida, 1980

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1994

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MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency. (References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

## ABSTRACT

THE MAHDIST REVOLUTION by MAJOR Robert N. Rossi, USA, 88 pages.

This paper analyzes the Mahdist Revolution in the Sudan from 1881 to 1885. Mohammed Ahmed bin Abdallah proclaimed himself the Mahdi (the expected one or the deliverer in the Islamic faith) and fought the colonial Egyptian government of the Sudan and the British. Britain was drawn into the conflict by its interest in the Suez Canal, its heavy financial investments in Egypt, and its participation in suppressing the Arabi revolt.

Mohammed Ahmed successfully defeated the Egyptian and British forces brought against him and established an Islamic state in the Sudan. He succeeded by effectively combining religious, economic, cultural, and military strategy under charismatic leadership.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The Mahdist Revolution succeeded because Mohammed Ahmed bin Abdallah effectively combined religious, economic, and cultural appeals under charismatic leadership to build a military force capable of defeating his enemies. Mohammed Ahmed was a native Sudanese who adopted the title of Mahdi (the expected one or the deliverer in the Islamic faith) and led his people in a revolution that toppled Egyptian colonialism.

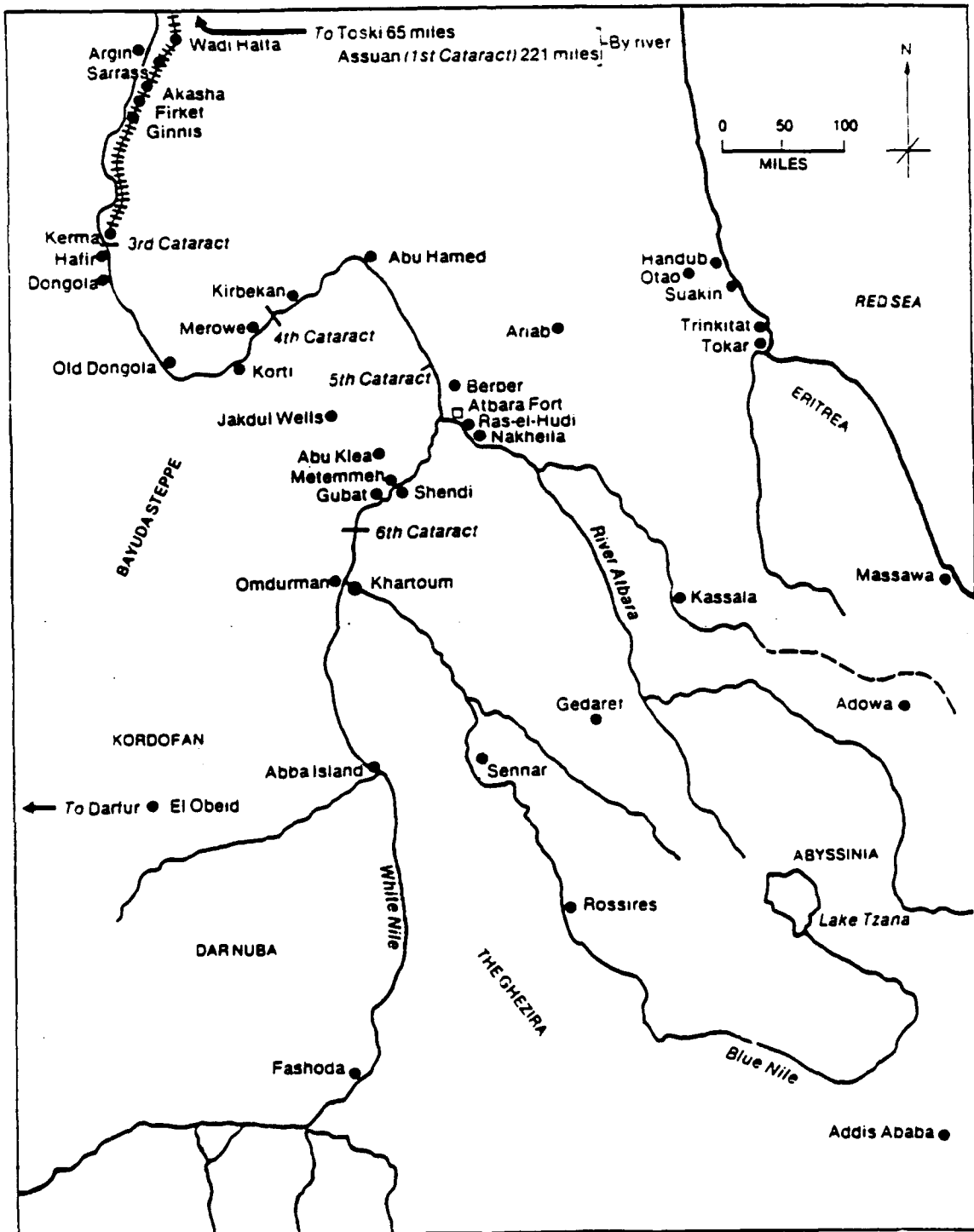
The Mahdist Revolution took place in the Sudan from 1881-1885. It succeeded only after a bitter and costly struggle. The initial revolt expanded following early military successes, effective reforms, and the spread of the Mahdi's religious message throughout the Sudan. Ironically, the Mahdi would gain time to strengthen his cause because of the inadvertent but timely assistance of a native Egyptian who led a nationalistic revolt in Egypt during a key time in the Mahdist revolution. The Mahdi's final victory came following a confrontation with an increasingly concerned and hostile British Empire. From their base in Egypt, the British would be drawn to the conflict in the Sudan. They would inflict severe losses on Mahdist forces, but they

would not defeat the Mahdist Revolution.

The Mahdi succeeded in his quest to throw off what he referred to as the "Turkish" yoke and establish a religious state in the Sudan. He accomplished this by combining charismatic leadership with effective strategy.

This paper will trace his actions in these areas that led to success in his four year war against his enemies. I will first discuss the colonial situation in the Sudan in the late nineteenth century, the Mahdi's background and upbringing, his early successes, the role of the Arabi revolt in Egypt in the success of the Mahdist revolution, and finally his major military actions. I will analyze his first significant military success, the conquest of the provincial capitol El Obeid. I will then explain how his military successes and the Arabi revolt led eventually to increased British military involvement in the Sudan. I will show how the Mahdi defeated British military commanders (foremost among them General Sir Charles Gordon of Khartoum) who came to stop him, and how he successfully completed the conquest of the Sudan.

# THE SUDAN



## CHAPTER 2

### THE COLONIAL SUDAN

Muhammad Ali, the Ottoman Viceroy of Egypt, began the colonization of the Sudan in the early nineteenth century. His exact motive for doing so in 1821 is not known, but is certainly related to his desire for more manpower in order to expand his armed forces.<sup>1</sup> He wanted an army without roots in Egyptian society, and hence dependent on him. Muhammad Ali hoped to expand both his economy and his military. He used his expanded military to wage war against his nominal overlords, the Ottomans. However, during his warfare with the Ottomans, European intervention prevented the Viceroy from the conquest of Constantinople, but left the Egyptians as a largely autonomous power within the Ottoman Empire.

A legacy of Egypt's military expansion was its acquisition and continued colonialization of the Sudan. The Egyptians had only limited practical use for the Sudan after the conclusion of Muhammad Ali's wars against the Ottomans, but they continued to occupy it with troops and maintain a colonial administration responsive to Cairo.

Egyptian rule was not a major factor in Sudanese life during the early colonial years when Muhammad Ali's

focus was on his wars against the Ottomans. The Sudan had no central government at the time of its conquest by the Egyptians and had few characteristics of a nation state.

Egyptian exploration and conquest served principally to group together separate peoples under a central colonial government. The area was populated by many different tribes. The Beja, Bisharin, Amara, Baggara, Ababdeha, and many other peoples lived in the areas which would come to be known as the Sudan.<sup>2</sup> In 1826 Muhammad Ali began to unify the Sudan and rule it from a central government based in Khartoum.<sup>3</sup> The Egyptians continued to explore and colonize, and by 1881 the Sudan was geographically much the same as today.

The Egyptians found that the majority of the "Sudanese" people shared the common faith of Islam and, to a lesser extent, the Arabic language. The relatively well explored northern Sudan was primarily an Arab and Muslim area while the southern Sudan was primarily Black African and non-Muslim. The southern Sudan had only recently been colonized by Egypt.

Sudanese life centered on the tribe. The main concern of all Sudanese was subsisting in the harsh environment in which they lived. In the early to mid 19th century, agriculture and slave trading were the primary economic activities for the Sudanese. Outside of a very small elite, education was synonymous with religion and consisted of teaching young men how to read the Koran,

Islam's holy book and God's (Allah's) revealed word to the Prophet Mohammed. Tribal life in the Sudan had not required the establishment of an education system to be successful at subsistence farming or the export of slaves. Politics centered on tribal issues and generally did not extend beyond local concerns. Tribal rule was predominately hereditary and required neither the existence of a substantial bureaucracy nor formal political training or education. The majority of the Sudanese were untouched by government before the Egyptian conquest.

However, the Egyptians changed this situation. Originally colonized to produce manpower for the army, the Sudan soon became to be seen as a source of revenue for its Egyptian overlords. During the middle of the 19th century, the Sudan suffered greatly under a succession of Egyptian rulers whose interest was primarily financial. Her Egyptian appointed Governors General (most of whom were non-Egyptian) steadily increased Sudan's tax burden as they strove vainly to make the Sudan a profitable colony. However, the Sudan would never become a profitable colony. It was run at a loss, and corruption by colonial officials was widespread.<sup>4</sup>

Increasingly, the rulers of Egypt found themselves short of revenue. Between 1821 (the beginning of the Egyptian conquest of the Sudan) and 1881 (the proclamation of the Mahdi) the Egyptian rulers embarked on a series of costly modernization programs in Egypt that continued to drain the treasury but often resulted in failure.

Although the Egyptian rulers sought ways to finance their projects, they eventually had to rely heavily on European financing for many of their undertakings. European bankers supplied the investment money for many Egyptian projects. Egyptian modernization projects (the Suez Canal being the most well known) utilized European technicians and advisors. This swelled the growth of the European population in Egypt. As a result, European influence in Egypt increased rapidly, and by 1882 Egypt had become a virtual British colony. Egypt's colony to its south would also feel the effects of Cairo's attempts at modernization.

Administration in the Sudan mirrored administration in Egypt, becoming more and more European. Egyptian Viceroy Ismail Pasha's many modernization attempts had the unwanted effect of bringing many Europeans to a position of power and influence in Egypt. The Khedive was slowly sacrificing his independence for financial support. By trying to make Egypt the equal of the European states, he needed both European technical and financial support. Thanks to Egypt's strategic geographic position, the Europeans were willing to provide that support.

In the early years of Egyptian colonialization in the Sudan, the area had been viewed as a potentially profitable source of slaves. But the Egyptian rulers' modernization attempts resulted in a policy outlawing the slave trade. The prohibition of slavery made the

exportation of slaves illegal and, for those who still engaged in the practice, a small but significant number, slave trading became a prohibitively expensive occupation.

When Ismail Pasha inherited the position of Viceroy of Egypt in 1863, he brought in Europeans to help him eradicate the slave trade. As one of his modernization attempts, the Khedive (a new title he used in lieu of Viceroy) appointed General Charles Gordon of England as Governor of the Sudanese province of Equatoria with a mandate to suppress the slave trade. This first European appointment in the Sudan, in 1874, would be followed by several more. These appointments had the effect of bringing many Europeans to a position of power and increasing European influence in Egyptian and Sudanese affairs.

General Charles Gordon of England was given the task of simultaneously eradicating the slave trade and increasing tax revenue. Gordon's Sudan administration from 1874 to 1879 was run honestly and reduced corruption, but it did not prevent Sudanese discontent with the abolition of slavery and their high tax burden. The presence of non-Muslim European administrators to rule in the Sudan also served to aggravate discontent with the government because of their radically different cultural and religious background.<sup>5</sup>

In 1881, at the time of the Mahdist revolution, the Egyptian government ruled the Sudan with approximately 40,000 soldiers.<sup>6</sup> The colonial administration was headquartered in Khartoum at the confluence of the Blue and



White Niles. The Governor General of the Sudan was an Egyptian, Rauf Pasha.

The Sudan was divided into the provinces of Bahr El Ghazal, Berber, Darfur, Dongola, Equatoria, Sennar, and Kordofan. Three of the provinces (Bahr El Ghazal, Darfur, and Equatoria) had European provincial governors. These were the newest provinces of the Sudan, contained the majority of the Sudan's black population, and had been explored and colonized by Egypt. The slave trade had flowed largely from these provinces but Arab (Muslim) Sudanese had profited as middlemen.

By abolishing the slave trade, the Egyptian rulers had inadvertently sown seeds of discontent in the Sudan. Until 1881 no one had attempted to mobilize Sudanese discontentment against Egyptian rule. Mohammed Ahmed would do so.

### CHAPTER 3

#### MOHAMMED AHMED

Mohammed Ahmed bin Abdallah was a native Sudanese from Dongola province. He came from an Arab family that made its living building boats along the Nile in northern Sudan. Born in 1844, Mohammed Ahmed did not follow in his father's footsteps, and early in life became interested in the study of religion.

Although the Egyptians had established a system in Egypt to educate Sudanese to become religious teachers, Mohammed Ahmed received no formal education. He began his religious studies in 1861 in Sennar province under Muhammad Sharif Nur al-Da'im, an acknowledged Islamic Sufi (mystical) leader (shaykh) within the Sudan.<sup>1</sup> Little is known of Mohammed Ahmed's early life or studies. He learned to read and write and could recite the Koran from memory. This impressive feat, even among the dedicated, indicates not only that he was a serious and devout student, but also that he would capture the respect of the largely illiterate population. Nothing else is recorded until Mohammed Ahmed broke away from his leader in 1878 over a dispute concerning Islamic purity.

His shaykh had absolved his followers from the prohibitions against singing and dancing at the circumcision feast of his sons. For Mohammed Ahmed this was heresy. He steadfastly refused to believe that it was in the power of his shaykh to make such a dispensation. Sharif Nur al-Da'im cursed Mohammed Ahmed and eventually banished him. After several attempts at obtaining his master's forgiveness, he was offered reconciliation, but Mohammed Ahmed refused, and set up his own religious study group.<sup>2</sup> His reasons for not accepting reconciliation with his master are open to speculation. He was cursed by his mentor and ethnically slurred across tribal lines.<sup>3</sup> Mohammed Ahmed did not feel it was worthwhile staying with a religious leader who harbored both a prejudice and a willingness to bend the rules if it suited him.

This action vividly demonstrated Mohammed Ahmed's strong religious convictions and character, and it also began his leadership of an independent religious group in the Sudan. Two years later, in 1880, he was a relatively well known religious leader residing on Abba Island, 150 miles south of Khartoum on the White Nile. His religious preaching advocated a literal interpretation of the Koran and strict observance of Islamic laws and values (which allowed for slavery), a devout way of life, and disdain for those considered to lack true devotion. He stressed the importance of living a pure life in accordance with the Koran and the teachings of the Prophet. Earthly life was of

no consequence except as a test to determine who would enter the paradise reserved for true believers. True believers overcame all obstacles encountered in this world in order to enter the paradise promised in the next world. Although he was certainly a purist or fundamentalist (took the Koran literally), his personal life demonstrated close adherence to the philosophy he preached for all to follow.

From Abba Island, Mohammed Ahmed travelled locally in Sennar and Kordofan provinces spreading his religious philosophy and attracted a popular following. His increasing popularity gained notice in Khartoum, the Egyptian colonial capitol. His former shaykh had informed the authorities about him, and Nile travellers often visited his island residence and retold the story of a poor man who lived a life of purity and had rejected hypocrisy. Mohammed Ahmed's stance on religion and his anticolonial rhetoric was becoming too popular amongst the Sudanese living alongside the southern Nile. By 1881 Mohammed Ahmed was leading approximately two hundred followers on Abba Island. During his travels, he spread his influence among many known religious leaders in the western and southern provinces of the Sudan. The Egyptian colonial government had dealt with local anti-government individuals and revolts in the past, and Mohammed Ahmed looked to be no different.

However, the Egyptian colonial officials failed to realize that religion was the primary basis for his anti-government stance and that the government's legitimacy

was being questioned on religious grounds. They had dealt with uprisings and revolts before, but since Muhammad Ali's initial conquest of the Sudan, none of these revolts had attempted to unite the Sudan's diverse tribes against foreign rule. Though some had involved serious fighting, they were local revolts. The colonial government's experiences with revolts by slave merchants and tax evaders had been on a different level and had not involved a serious threat to the continuation of the colonial system.

Mohammed Ahmed used religious philosophy to unite his followers. His appeal attracted followers across tribal lines and his evenhanded treatment of all followers helped spread his revolt throughout the Sudan. Although he was not an advocate of Sudanese nationalism, his travels in the Sudan convinced him that religion was the only common ground on which he could forge Sudanese, and eventually Islamic, unity. Unification of peoples from different tribal societies was possible only by outlining a vision with broad appeal. His religious visions served this purpose. He also provided the people a common enemy. That enemy was the foreigners, whom he referred to as the Turks. The Turkish reference referred to the colonial administrators in power in the Sudan. He branded the administration and its members "Turks." Based on the actual ethnic makeup of the Egyptian government in the Ottoman Empire, his description was fairly accurate.<sup>4</sup> The majority of the colonial government in the

Sudan was composed of non-Egyptians. The original official language of the colonial Sudan government was Turkish. The personnel employed by the Egyptians came from throughout the Ottoman world. Mohammed Ahmed did not declare the Egyptians as his enemies. It was easier to label the Turks as a threat to the Islamic community in several ways: they were non-Arab and ruled an empire, and they engaged in practices violating Islamic injunctions (strictly interpreted), openly smoking and employing unbelievers to oversee the faithful. Against such an obvious threat to the Islamic community, a Jihad (a war or campaign to protect the Islamic community) could be justified.

Mohammed Ahmed had identified what he considered a justifiable threat to the Islamic community, but he would need more than that to be successful. He needed to establish his personal legitimacy as a leader in order to overthrow Egyptian colonialism. He would use several symbols from the Koran and Islamic traditions to create and enhance this legitimacy. He referred to the mole on his face as a sign of his coming as the expected deliverer or Mahdi. During his four-year war against Egypt, with its increasing British support for Egyptian success, he would widen his struggle to prove that legitimacy.

He carefully compared his actions to those of the Prophet Mohammed. In the Islamic faith the Mahdi is believed to succeed the Prophet as the promised "guide" for the faithful. He will establish the ideal Islamic world,

free of impurities, and safeguard the Muslim community of true believers (umma). Mohammed Ahmed claimed that role for himself.

Because his war would seek the replacement of colonial rule with an Islamic state by revolution, his perceived legitimacy would be critical for success. The Sudan was a tribal society that had only recently experienced the effects of a forcibly imposed central government. He could not take advantage of nationalistic appeals as we know them today, for they did not exist in the culturally diverse Sudan ruled by Egyptian overlords. He would take advantage of native discontentment with all things "Turkish," in particular by appealing to the single unifying force available to him: religion. He strongly believed in what he was doing. His sincerity was vital to motivate the divergent Sudanese to participate in his struggle. He did not compromise his principles or admit defeat at any time. For Mohammed Ahmed, the struggle was divinely inspired.

He would need inspiration for what lay ahead, and a good deal of effective political wisdom.

## CHAPTER 4

### EARLY VICTORIES

The Egyptian colonial government initiated the first direct military action which took place in the Sudan during the Mahdist Revolution. As previously noted, Mohammed Ahmed's emergence as a possible troublemaker had become known to the authorities in Khartoum. His old shaykh had informed the government of his teachings. The government had belatedly recognized that Mohammed Ahmed's religious position, advocating purification of the world from wantonness and corruption, was a direct threat to its rule.<sup>1</sup> Although his movement counted no more than a few hundred adherents, the government realized its potential for expansion.

In June 1881, the Egyptian Governor General of the Sudan, Rauf Pasha, dispatched Abu Saud, a man known to Mohammed Ahmed, to convince Mohammed Ahmed to come to Khartoum where he could be questioned (and detained if the rumors about his anti-government preachings proved to be true). Mohammed Ahmed refused to return with Abu Saud to Khartoum. Two months later, the Governor General provided Abu Saud with two companies of colonial Egyptian troops to apprehend Mohammed Ahmed.



Mohammed Ahmed and two to three hundred of his followers were located on Abba Island. Although warned of the government's action, they possessed no firearms to resist the government troops.

Abu Saud embarked his approximately two hundred troops at Khartoum on a Nile steamer and set off. Governor General Rauf Pasha had made a serious error prior to their leaving Khartoum. He had promised the company commander who captured Mohammed Ahmed a promotion to the rank of major.<sup>2</sup> His action was apparently designed as an incentive of good performance by his soldiers, but it had the unwanted effect of pitting the two companies against each other. The result was to lead to a total lack of cooperation between the two separate bodies of troops.

The government expedition arrived at Abba Island late in the day of 12 August. Abu Saud stayed aboard the steamer and dispatched his troops to apprehend Mohammed Ahmed. Their mission appeared simple, but because of the Governor General's offer, each company went its own way.

Mohammed Ahmed and his followers ambushed the government troops, and, in separate engagements, routed them. Mohammed Ahmed's followers defeated the government troops without the use of firearms, using only what they had available. The traditional weapons of the area were short spears that can either be thrust or thrown. Swords and shields were also used by indigenous peoples of the Sudan, but were not as prevalent as the spear. Although accounts

differ as to what Mohammed Ahmed's followers had on hand during their fight on Abba Island, they were clearly at a severe disadvantage compared to the Egyptians sent against them.

The Egyptian troops were relatively well-equipped with the Remington rifle as their primary weapon. The Remington is a single-shot breechloader and can be fitted with a bayonet. It has an effective range of 500 yards, although the effective use of any weapon relies heavily on the training and the discipline of the troops utilizing it.

The Egyptian soldiers in the Sudan were neither well led nor well cared for. Throughout the Egyptian Army, a posting to the Sudan was seen as a form of punishment, and it was not unknown for the Egyptian government to use it as such.<sup>3</sup>

Mohammed Ahmed's followers would always be at a disadvantage in terms of military technology during the coming conflicts. To counter this disadvantage, the major factor in their favor during their battles with the Egyptians was superior morale.

The Mahdist forces, as they were shortly to be known, displayed excellent morale and spirit. The combination of both the religious promise of paradise if killed in battle and leaders who shared their dangers would bring about excellent battlefield performance. Although the Mahdi himself did not lead from the front, the high battlefield casualty rates of his subordinate military

commanders' shows that they did. A well-led disciple, believing in the Mahdi's position as the guided one who struggled only for purity in his quest to achieve paradise, was a dangerous foe. Death on the battlefield against the religious enemies of the Islamic community was thought to ensure entry to paradise.

After the action on Abba Island, the survivors fled back to the steamer. Abu Saud embarked them and sailed back to Khartoum. Mohammed Ahmed had his first military victory.

Mohammed Ahmed could not stay where he was. He had too few followers to prevent his capture during the expected next expedition by colonial authorities. He needed a base of operations more remote from the authorities in Khartoum.

He announced to his followers that he had received an inspiration to proceed to Jebel Masa.<sup>4</sup> The actual destination was Jebel Gedir, but because Islamic tradition taught that "Jebel Masa" was the origin of the "Mahdi," the anointed one, Mohammed Ahmed called it Jebel Masa. He led his followers to Jebel Gedir in Kordofan province. Mohammed Ahmed would later liken this hegira (flight) from the authorities to the Prophet Mohammed's hegira from Mecca to Medina and urge others to flee colonial rule and join him in his struggle.<sup>5</sup> By this action and others to follow, Mohammed Ahmed was carefully legitimizing his leadership of a religious movement that had now entered into open revolt against the colonial government. Whenever possible, he compared his actions with those of the Prophet. Because

most Sudanese, although illiterate, were familiar with the Koran and Islamic traditions, such comparisons were very effective as propaganda and helped greatly to expand his following.

The authorities in Kordofan missed the opportunity to capture Mohammed Ahmed as he fled to Jebel Masa. But they were determined to bring him to justice and organized a force of 1,400 men under Rashed Bey, the governor of the town of Fashoda, in Kordofan province, to arrest Mohammed Ahmed. On 7 December 1881 Mohammed Ahmed's military force, approximately 8,000 men strong, ambushed and decisively defeated them.

Following this victory Mohammed Ahmed openly proclaimed himself the Mahdi.

I saw the Prophet in a vision. He came to me in the presence of our brother fiki Isa (Jesus). He sat by me and he said to our brother Isa, "The Mahdi is your chief." The brother said, "I believe in him." The Prophet again said to him, "If any one believe not in him, he believes neither in God nor His Prophet." And this he repeated three times.<sup>6</sup>

He sent emissaries and letters to tell the people of his Jihad to purify the Islamic religion and slay the Turkish disbelievers. This was a significant step for Muhammad Ahmed, and indicated he no longer hoped for or desired reconciliation with the authorities in Khartoum. His proclamation had the effect of providing him a religious and a political legitimacy that transcended tribal lines: any member of the "faithful" who shared a belief in traditional

pure Islam, was now a "follower." His numbers had swollen considerably after his first success on Abba Island in August. He had fought Rashed Bey in December with 8,000 warriors. This rapid accumulation of strength would not have been possible without a broad belief in the righteousness of his cause and its divine inspiration that transcended to tribal affiliation. It was identical to the Prophet Mohammed's appeal. Before his next battle his forces would be 15,000 strong.<sup>7</sup>

The colonial government now began to realize that the Mahdist uprising was more than just a local revolt. It had initially dealt with Mohammed Ahmed all too lightly. The colonial authorities were determined not to repeat their earlier failures. Governor General Rauf Pasha sent 4,000 reinforcements from Khartoum to Kordofan province to capture the Mahdi. There they were joined by 2,000 troops and irregulars dispatched from El Obeid, the capitol of Kordofan province.

From January until May 1882 the authorities concentrated their forces at Fashoda. By the middle of May they were ready to begin the campaign.

The government force was led by Yusef Pasha Shellali, an experienced campaigner who had helped add the once important slave-producing province of Bahr el Ghazal to government control. However, his overconfidence and a lack of reliable, accurate intelligence were to lead to disaster.

Approaching Jebel Masa, the Egyptian forces encamped on the sixth of June but made no defensive preparations. At first light the Mahdist forces attacked with their spears and swords in a human wave, finding the government troops totally unprepared and many still asleep. The battle did not last long and the Mahdists secured a complete and overwhelming victory.<sup>8</sup> Few, if any Egyptian survivors from these early battles successfully returned to government controlled outposts. Many, if not most of the survivors became members of the Mahdi's forces, a further demonstration of his universal appeal.<sup>9</sup>

This victory spawned a major revolt throughout the Sudan. Forces loyal to the Mahdi began to form and attack government forces without the Mahdi's physical presence. His use of emissaries to spread his message and his followers' military successes were beginning to bear fruit.

The Mahdi was aware that he could not successfully lead a revolution without expanding the number and extent of his loyal and inspired subordinates. He knew he must widen his following to be successful. Previous revolts in the Sudan had always been suppressed. When the government was able to concentrate its efforts in a single part of its territories, it had always been successful. Only with widespread popular support could the Mahdi overwhelm the government's isolated responses and accomplish the Islamic purification of the Sudan.

To widen his following and gain mass popular support, he began a sophisticated propaganda campaign. First he wrote letters (three volumes of which have survived) to religious and political (tribal) leaders.<sup>10</sup> His letters consistently urged devotion to God and the overthrow of the "Turkish" yoke.

It is not outside the range of your knowledge that argument and eloquence do not always guide men to the truth, for God is the only guide . . . Know also that I do nothing but by the direct command of the Prophet. By his command we fight the Turks.<sup>11</sup>

This correspondence was not limited to the Sudan, but included Islamic leaders outside of the Sudan as well.

The Mahdi also dispatched personal emissaries to spread his message. Both his emissaries and letters received favorable reception, for as his victories and strength grew, more and more people were willing to join his cause. This success owed much to the Mahdi's effective use of propaganda to mobilize the masses to participate in revolutionary war.

The Mahdi never traveled outside of Kordofan and Sennar provinces of the Sudan; his death came too early after his conquest of the Sudan. In the absence of personal leadership, his use of emissaries and his correspondence were crucial to the success of the revolution. His propaganda campaign played on general discontent and focused on the benefits of joining a just cause: the establishment of a pure Islamic society. He backed up his propaganda

campaign with military support. As revolt spread, he dispatched forces loyal to his cause to assist others in overthrowing the colonial administration.

Most of the Sudan would fall under Mahdist rule without the Mahdi's physical presence at the diverse battle sites. He could not possibly hope to be present at every skirmish. The distances involved simply made that an impossibility. Nevertheless, the Mahdi also recognized that he must prevent the government from massing its forces against him. By creating unrest in a province, or the fear of an uprising, he was able to deter the government from dispatching reinforcements from one of its many garrisons throughout the Sudan to another threatened area.

Simultaneous action at widely separated places by Mahdist forces created a complex threat for the colonial forces and severely limited their flexibility. Mahdist revolts in Bahr El Ghazal, Berber, Darfur, Dongola, Equatoria, and Sennar provinces all occurred without the Mahdi's direct involvement. Many religious and tribal leaders willingly accepted the Mahdi's emissaries and his call to Jihad. During all of these actions, he remained in Kordofan, far from government reprisals, and only after broad success did he move upon the colonial capital of Khartoum.

In addition to new recruits, the Mahdist forces also gained much booty in their early victories. The Mahdi saw the need to develop a financial system as his numbers and the amount of territory under his control increased. In



April 1883 he formally announced the establishment of the Beit el Mal (Ministry of Finance). He appointed Ahmad Sulayman, a native of Darfur province, as his Treasurer.<sup>12</sup> This was the Mahdi's first attempt at establishing a governmental agency. His religious vision had carried him into a position of responsibility that now began to include providing governmental services to his followers.

After destroying Yusef Pasha's troops in June, the Mahdi marched his forces out of the mountains of Kordofan province. His objective was El Obeid, the capitol of Kordofan province. His success at El Obeid owed much to simultaneous events in Egypt.

The birth of Sudanese anticolonialism and resentment with foreign domination was greatly assisted by a concurrent rise in Egyptian nationalism and resentment of foreign domination. As the Mahdist forces shifted to offensive operations, their task was greatly facilitated by an Egyptian revolt which would prohibit substantial aid from being sent to the Sudan to fight the Mahdist revolution.

However, by the time of the El Obeid campaign, Mohammed Ahmed had successfully risen from an obscure religious leader to the head of a powerful army in less than two years. He had effectively mobilized native resentment against colonial rule under the auspices of a religious movement and a nascent sense of nationalism had been born.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE ARABI REVOLT

The turmoil within the Sudan was accompanied by turmoil within Egypt. Though not related to the Mahdist Revolution, the Arabi revolt in Egypt in 1882 was to affect events in the Sudan.

The idea of cutting the time it took for trade goods to travel from Europe to the Far East had interested Europeans since the twelfth century journeys of Marco Polo. During the nineteenth century technology provided the means to do something about it. The Suez Canal, completed in 1869, had originally been a French-backed endeavor. In 1875 England acquired rights to the canal by buying Khedive Ismail Pasha's shares. He was forced to sell his shares due to his country's insolvency.

Now both France and England had vested interests in Egypt. The number of Europeans in Egypt, which had been steadily increasing due to Khedive Ismail's policy of modernization, increased dramatically after the completion of the canal. The amount of European money invested in Egypt also rose proportionally.

To make matters worse, Khedive Ismail was proving less and less able to run the country on any sort of solvent

footing. The French and British therefore began to assume the financial administration of Egypt. The influx of British government money to purchase the Khedive's share of the canal was only a temporary stopgap. The financial situation in Egypt became so bad that even the sale of the canal shares could not put Egypt in a position of solvency.

By 1878 control of Egyptian finances was a shared responsibility of France and England. This system was known as the dual control. Other government services dependent on the treasury were soon brought under the control of the Europeans as well. Although the Khedive may have had a love for things European and a desire to join the community of modern nation states, he viewed European involvement as a threat to his base of power.

Ismail did not sit by idly and let his authority be usurped. He conspired against the European system of control, and attempted to force the Europeans out. He did not succeed.

The European powers were unwilling to risk losing their investments so they turned to the nominal overlord of Egypt, the ruler of the Ottoman Empire, for help. In return for continued French and British support against Russia, the Ottomans were coerced into helping the European powers. The Ottoman Sultan deposed the Khedive and put the Khedive's son Tewfik on the throne in 1879.

The increased European influence and the growing control of Egyptian affairs were obvious to the Egyptian

people. There was rising discontent among many elements of the Egyptian population. Ottoman overlordship had been distant and Egyptian executive authority had remained largely autonomous, but this new European influence and control was highly visible and of a different nature. The lack of religious commonality and racial background only further highlighted the differences in the new power struggle in Egypt. One of the most discontented elements within Egypt was the Egyptian military.

The Egyptian military had much cause to be unhappy. The continued miserable state of finances within the government meant that pay was often late if not lacking altogether. Compounding this discontentment, Ismail forced the military to make reductions in order to cut budget expenditures by the government. And the military did not care for Egyptian involvement in the Sudan either, as a posting to the Sudan was equivalent to banishment.

This situation provided the background for the Arabi revolt, which was to play a significant part in shaping the success of the Mahdist revolt. Because the Mahdist forces were now switching to offensive operations, Egyptian military and governmental focus needed to be on the Sudan if the Mahdi was to be defeated. The Arabi revolt would prevent that from happening.

Colonel Arabi, was an Egyptian who had risen to a relatively high rank for a native born soldier: he was one of only two native born colonels in the Egyptian army.

Around him crystallized increasing indigenous resentment to the continued growth of foreign domination of Egyptian affairs. As in the Sudan, such resentment, although less religious than political, would lead to armed conflict.

Arabi seized power in May 1882, but maintained the Khedive as the nominal head of state to prevent intervention by the West and the Ottoman Empire. By July 1882 the situation had deteriorated so badly that the British government began to consider armed intervention. Riots directed at Europeans had led to bloodshed the month previously, and Arabi had been rapidly expanding the Egyptian military establishment and fortifying the harbor of Alexandria.

After the Ottomans and French declined to commit military forces to restore the newly appointed Khedive Tewfik back to full power, the British dispatched a fleet to Alexandria. Britain's financial investments and strategic interests in the Suez Canal were sufficiently important to prompt her to take unilateral action.

Britain's bombardment of Alexandria in August 1882 was immediately followed by a rapid and successful ground campaign. The British soundly defeated Arabi's forces at Tel El Kebir on 13 September 1882. The British reinstated the Khedive and banished Arabi. The Egyptian Army was reduced to 6,000 men and put totally under British control. A British colonial administration followed and the British retained the Khedive as titular head of state.

During his few months in power, Arabi had not viewed the Mahdist revolt as a top priority. He simply could not pay attention to a colony in revolt when his very own survival was at stake. He could not dispatch soldiers to the Sudan to crush the revolt when it was in its infancy, because he needed them on hand to insure his base of power.

Arabi's expulsion left the British government as the de facto ruler of Egypt. The Khedive's reinstatement had occurred only as a result of the employment of British bayonets. The Egyptian Army had gone over to Arabi en masse, and the Khedive no longer trusted his military.

By default, the military situation in the Sudan fell to the forces already deployed there. The Mahdist forces were able to take advantage of the time gained by Egyptian turmoil to achieve a decisive victory at El Obeid. Egyptian military morale, not strong to begin with, would suffer another blow. More importantly, the Egyptian military was not able to intervene effectively when the Mahdi was at his most vulnerable, tied down in siege warfare at El Obeid.

## CHAPTER 6

### EL OBEID

The Arabi revolt in Egypt could not have come at a better time for the Mahdi's military campaign. To this point, the Mahdi had remained on the defensive and was content simply to survive. But beginning in June 1882, precisely at the time of Egyptian powerlessness due to the Arabi revolt, he switched his campaign to offensive operations.

The destruction of Yusef Pasha's column in June 1882, and the Mahdi's growing popular support provided the impetus for offensive operations. The objective of the first Mahdist offensive was El Obeid, the capital of Kordofan province.

Quickly following up on their recent victory against Yusef Pasha, the Mahdist forces left the security of their remote mountain base and arrived at El Obeid in late June 1882. The Mahdi called on Said Pasha, the governor of Kordofan province, to surrender his capital.

Said Pasha refused this request and defiantly executed the Mahdi's emissaries who brought him this offer.<sup>1</sup> His refusal did not surprise the Mahdi. The Mahdi understood that this was a revolutionary war, aimed at

overthrowing the old order, and that many of his opponents would be fellow Sudanese and fellow Muslims who saw him as a threat to their positions. To advance his ideology the Mahdi used agents to go among the population and spread the word. Those who joined him would be considered believers and they could expect to join the community of God. The Mahdi repeatedly pardoned those who had fought against him. One only had to accept the Mahdi's preachings. Upon doing so the Mahdi added them to his ranks.

The Egyptian government forces employed many Sudanese irregulars and required material and financial support (in the form of taxes) from Sudanese merchants and farmers in order to survive. With no independent logistics system, the Egyptian forces depended on local Sudanese support in order to conduct operations.

Every Egyptian outpost and garrison in the Sudan gathered its food and water locally. Slatin Pasha, the Austrian-born governor of Darfur province employed by the Egyptians, attempted to hold his province for the government during the Mahdist revolution. He constantly urged his subordinates to lay in a good stock of foodstuffs in order to withstand a siege. The Egyptian logistic system was stretched simply by providing arms and ammunition to its colonial forces. Not even the Sudanese capitol of Khartoum contained facilities to make arms and ammunition.

Like Slatin Pasha, Said Pasha had wisely gathered food prior to the Mahdist investiture of his capital. His



preparations to withstand a siege were almost sufficient to win.

Having failed to compel the garrison to surrender, the Mahdi attempted an assault. The assault failed miserably. However, the garrison did not follow up its success by counterattacking after the failure of the assault and lost a great opportunity to break the siege.<sup>2</sup>

His first military defeat altered the Mahdi's view on military matters. Until now his forces had not utilized the weapons taken in their prior military successes. The Mahdi now changed his policy, and collected the captured weapons of his previous triumphs from Jebel Masa and distributed them to his forces.<sup>3</sup> However, the primary weapon of the Mahdist forces would remain the spear and sword. Although they continued to rely on mass assaults to close with their enemies, they now integrated riflemen in the attack to weaken the enemy's defenses prior to the close assault.

At El Obeid the Mahdi was fortunate not to need another assault. His forces had lost heavily. Although the total Mahdist casualties are not known, they probably numbered about one to two thousand. His own brother was killed.

The Mahdi decided to maintain the siege of El Obeid and attempt to starve the garrison into submission. Its only relief could come from Khartoum, and the government there had its hands full. Owing to the Arabi rebellion, the

Sudan would have no reinforcements. By this time the Mahdist message had spread widely and most of the provinces were in revolt. Reinforcements were needed at many places.

Nevertheless, the Governor General recognized that defeating the main Mahdist force besieging El Obeid would yield the most dividends and managed to organize a relief expedition and dispatch it to Kordofan province. The expedition consisted of only two thousand men and never reached El Obeid. Mahdist forces attacked the relief column on the march and defeated it. The survivors of the column managed to reach Bara, a government-held town three quarters of the way to El Obeid. The Mahdi had sufficient forces to put Bara under siege while maintaining the siege of El Obeid.

Bara capitulated to its besiegers in early January, 1883. The Mahdi made sure this news was known in El Obeid. No hope of relief for El Obeid was now possible. Starvation and desertion had considerably reduced the garrison. Its capitulation followed shortly. On 19 January 1883 the conquest of Kordofan province was successfully completed.

Despite these defeats, Governor General Rauf Pasha, and more importantly Khedive Tewfik in Cairo, were not willing to negotiate or give up the battle against the Mahdi after the loss of Kordofan province. They wanted to retake by force of arms what they had lost, but their resources for doing so were extremely limited as a result of the Arabi revolt. Tewfik could not rely on his much reduced military

force available in Egypt. He had only one viable  
alternative: ask for British assistance.

## CHAPTER 7

### BRITISH SURROGATE

The Khedive was unwilling to give up the Sudan and determined to crush the Mahdist revolt. However, after the Arabi revolt, his army had been reduced to 6,000 men and its morale was extremely poor. The remnants of the original garrison of the Sudan were not in much better shape. Losses against the Mahdi had been heavy, and the garrison of the Sudan could not be expected to reconquer what it had lost without substantial reinforcements. In addition, the army was now firmly under the control of British officers and noncommissioned officers.

The British had intervened in Egypt and restored the Khedive Tewfik because of substantial economic and strategic interests. They had no such interests in the Sudan. The Khedive was unable to convince the British government to help him restore his rule in the Sudan. Britain would not commit its armed forces solely to defeat the Mahdi.

Undeterred, the Khedive resorted to a practice that his predecessors had used: he hired out. Unable to rely on an army that had just revolted against him, a mercenary force seemed a logical choice. He chose to hire British citizens to lead his forces. The British government did not

object to this, as it was a common practice. British citizens had a long history of service to the Khedives.

Colonel William Hicks was hired as the Egyptian military commander at Khartoum. Colonel Hicks was a retired officer with experience in India, where he had served for most of his career as a member of the Indian army. He also had gained experience in Africa during an expedition in Abyssinia (Ethiopia). He was available to the Egyptians, but unfortunately lacked what was needed most against the Mahdi, command experience.<sup>1</sup>

The hiring of a British officer to command at Khartoum did not solve the Khedive's problems; he needed soldiers and subordinate commanders as well. The Khedive sought other European officers and hired them for service in the Sudan. But he was never able to hire enough. Hicks would have no more than six European subordinates. For the noncommissioned officers and enlisted soldiers the Khedive had no choice but to utilize the disbanded remnants of Arabi's forces. Never anxious to be stationed in the Sudan in the first place, the Egyptian soldiers under Hicks could not be described as enthusiastic. The best Egyptian troops, remnants of Arabi's forces, were already under British control and not available. Nevertheless, the Khedive managed to put together a substantial and rather well-equipped force.

Despite his many problems, Hicks met with early success in the late spring of 1883. By confining his

operations to the Nile basin, close to his base at Khartoum, he was able to turn back the local rebels fighting for the Mahdist cause.

During Hicks' initial successes, the Mahdi was consolidating his hold on Kordofan province and had not personally led his main army into the Nile area. His support among the various tribes along the Nile was not yet solid. The government forces were still superior to the Mahdist supporters in the local Nile area. Those that had risen against the Egyptian government could not hope to withstand Hicks' superior mobility and firepower, both based on the highway of the Nile. Hicks employed Nile steamers as a means of transport and supply as well as fire support by arming them with cannons and Nordenfelt machine-guns.

Hicks became commander-in-chief of Egyptian forces in the Sudan after completing several successful operations against Mahdist forces from March to May 1883. The Egyptian government was certainly pleased with his success, but the Khedive was not satisfied with pacifying the Nile basin alone.

Hicks was ordered by telegraph from Cairo to take the offensive and subdue Kordofan province. Hicks' force was composed of roughly 11,000 effectives. It was a well-armed infantry force with modest artillery and machine-gun support. Its major problem, other than the low morale of its troops, was the lack of sufficient cavalry to scout

effectively. The training level of many of the men was low, and no time was available to complete training.

The Mahdists controlled the countryside and had many sympathetic allies among the people. They knew the location of every column that had been sent against them. They also possessed a substantial mounted force consisting of both horse- and camel-mounted warriors. Their intelligence advantage in particular had aided them greatly in the destruction of every force sent against them. Hicks' column would suffer under even more disadvantages than had the previous columns sent into Kordofan province. Now there were no friendly garrisons in the province which could tie down the Mahdist forces or provide a base of supplies.

The column set out from Khartoum in early September 1883. Hicks was not able to maintain communications with Khartoum after he ventured into the interior of Kordofan province. Without effective intelligence, and not knowing from which direction the enemy would attack, he maneuvered his force in a square formation.

The members of the column knew that their chances of success, let alone survival, were doubtful.<sup>2</sup> Desertion among the members of the column was common: a European even deserted to the Mahdi prior to the destruction of the column.<sup>3</sup>

Totally dominant in the area of reconnaissance, the Mahdi chose the Shakyn forest as his battleground. His riflemen had ample targets within the closely packed square,

and his sword and spearmen were able to charge the enemy from behind cover. The end came to the Hicks' column on 5 November 1883. The Mahdists annihilated the column.

As a result of the complete destruction of the Hicks' column, a great deal of booty fell into the Mahdists' hands. The Mahdi had already established the Beit el Mal to handle the financial administration of his movement. On 6 November 1883, the day after the destruction of the Hicks' column, the Mahdi issued a proclamation clarifying the disposition of booty among his following:

You have given me your covenants and promises of obedience to my command . . . I am pleased with no-one who is fraudulent in anything of the booty. Let him be sincere to God and His Apostle and to Us and bring it to Us at the place where it is due, so that the Fifth may be taken from it and the rest divided among you in accordance with the commandment of God and His Apostle . . . We know that in this expedition were great wealth and innumerable possessions, all of which has fallen into your hands.<sup>4</sup>

The Mahdi followed the precedent set by the Prophet in his division of the booty. This act was typical of his actions. Whenever possible he linked himself to the Prophet in order to legitimize his claims to being accepted as the Mahdi.

In addition, these initial governmental decisions received broad acceptance by his followers. No Muslim could reject an action that followed the precedent set by the Prophet. The Mahdi's use of Islamic law and his reliance on



precedents set by the Prophet strengthened and broadened his support among the people.

The Mahdi's religious movement was now evolving in a more sophisticated manner. Based on his religious teachings, revolutionary war engulfed the Sudan. The Mahdi was adept at handling governmental decisions in this environment. He continued to increase the loyalty of his followers while continuing his propaganda campaign to spread his message and attract even more followers throughout the Sudan.

## CHAPTER 8

### SUAKIN

With the defeat of the Hicks column, no substantial Egyptian military forces remained in the Sudan to oppose the Mahdi's forces. The government of Egypt had scraped the bottom of the barrel to put together Hicks' force. The Egyptians could no longer hope to conduct offensive operations against the Mahdi, they were struggling simply to retain provinces where the Mahdi himself was not present. In desperation, they dispatched their last relief force to the eastern Sudan hoping to hold the seaport of Suakin. With Suakin, it was at least possible to hold open a line of communications with Berber on the Nile and then down to Khartoum. It was along this route that the Hicks column had reached Khartoum, which had long been an important communications route to the interior of the Sudan. It was also the path of Islamic pilgrims travelling to Mecca. The Nile river was not trafficable from Egypt to the Sudan because of the cataracts in the river. For all of these reasons the Suakin area was strategically important for the Egyptian government.

The Mahdi also realized the importance of this area and had appointed a subordinate to lead this region of the

colonial Sudan in the Jihad against the "Turks". His name was Osman Digna.

His political and economic background made him an ideal subordinate. Osman Digna was a slave trader who believed he had been ruined by the Egyptian government.<sup>1</sup> The prohibition against the slave trade and the combined British-Egyptian enforcement of the prohibition had left his family destitute. More important to the Mahdi, he was from a family that had close ties with the Hadendowa tribe of the eastern Sudan.

The Hadendowa are the celebrated "Fuzzy-Wuzzies" of Kipling's poetry. They lived along the Red Sea littoral of the Sudan and controlled the vital port area of Suakin, the Sudan's only link to the outside world other than the Nile.

Osman Digna traveled to the Mahdi in 1882. The Mahdi accepted him as his leader in this strategically vital area. He quickly ordered Osman Digna to raise and lead the Suakin area in revolution against the government. The Mahdi gave Osman Digna nothing to help him in his mission other than his blessings and letters to the people and religious leaders in the Suakin area.<sup>2</sup> This support would be enough to sustain Osman Digna in his struggle for Sudanese independence and religious beliefs long after the death of the Mahdi. He would continue to hold the Mahdi in high esteem as a leader of his people until his death in the 1920s.<sup>3</sup>

Osman Digna was successful in raising the people to revolt in the Suakin area and the Egyptian government realized that the loss of Suakin would sever its communications with the interior of the Sudan. By mid 1883 Osman Digna's forces were besieging and reducing the Egyptian garrisons in the area, and it looked to the Egyptians as if the entire Red Sea littoral would be lost to the Mahdists if reinforcements were not sent.

Valentine Baker, a former British army officer, led an Egyptian relief force to hold Suakin and repress the revolt in the eastern Sudan. Such was the state of the manpower shortage within the Egyptian military establishment that the relief force under Baker was mostly composed of Egyptian gendarmes. The gendarmes were policemen and were not trained for combat operations. Baker's force arrived in the Suakin area in December 1883. The mission of his 3,000 strong force was to relieve the besieged Egyptian garrisons of the province, restore Egyptian authority, and destroy Osman Digna's Mahdist forces. On 4 February 1884, Osman Digna decisively defeated Baker's force at the battle of El Teb (15 miles west of Suakin).

With Baker's defeat, the Egyptians had no more forces to send to the Sudan to fight the Mahdi. They were now left with the options of fighting the Mahdi with what they had on hand or withdrawing from the Sudan. Their military forces in the Sudan consisted of 10,000 men in the Khartoum vicinity and small detachments still holding out in

Berber, Dongola, Equatoria, and Suakin. None of the detachments were large enough to undertake offensive operations and each would be fortunate to withstand the Mahdi's offensive operations. Only with British assistance could they hope to militarily defeat the Mahdi. However, the British were unwilling to commit military forces to defeat the Mahdi and recommended the Egyptians evacuate the Sudan.<sup>4</sup> The Khedive agreed.

However, it was one thing to agree on a policy and quite another to carry it out. Osman Digna's forces cut the strategically important Suakin-Berber route. The Mahdi had now successfully mobilized the people, and the majority of the Sudan was in revolt. The Mahdi's conquest of Kordofan province and the spread of his strength to the Nile south of Khartoum cut off Darfur, Bahr El Ghazal, and Equatoria provinces. And in Berber and Dongola provinces north of Khartoum along the Nile, Mahdist unrest was beginning to make headway.

The British realized that the Suakin-Berber route was by far shorter than the Cairo-Berber route and took considerably less time to travel. They were also aware that the port of Suakin would provide the Mahdi with access to the world outside the Sudan. This threat probably influenced their decision to contain the revolt by holding Suakin. In December 1883 the British dispatched an expeditionary force under General Sir Gerald Graham, VC, to hold Suakin and drive off Osman Digna's Mahdist forces.

Graham's force would be the first British military action against the Mahdists. He commanded six infantry regiments and two cavalry regiments along with a battery of machine guns and a field artillery battery, altogether approximately 3,500 men.

On 29 February 1884 the British met Mahdist forces in combat at the second battle of El Teb. Osman Digna sent a force commanded by his nephew Madani bin Ali to reinforce the local commander Abdallah bin Hasid and oppose any advance from Suakin. Together they mustered 6,000 men. The Mahdist forces stood on the defensive in positions clearly visible to the advancing British. The British shelled their position. The Mahdists were faced with the options of charging across the open ground or facing eventual destruction at the hands of the superior British firepower. They chose the former. The Mahdist forces suffered severely in their attempts to close with the British squares. The British counted over 1,500 dead Ansar (the Mahdi's term for his warriors, copied from the Prophet Mohammed's name for his helpers at Medina) on the field against their loss of only 34. Both Mahdist leaders and three other emirs were among the dead. The British were highly impressed with the bravery displayed by the Hadendowa tribesmen fighting for the Mahdist cause.<sup>5</sup> General Graham relieved the Egyptian garrison of Tokar and returned to Suakin.

On 13 March 1884, General Graham engaged the Mahdists a second time at the battle of Tamai. Osman

Digna's cousin Mahsud Musa commanded the approximately 10,500 strong Ansar and utilized terrain more effectively at Tamai than his predecessors had at El Teb, but he was to suffer a similar fate against the superior British firepower. He kept his forces well hidden in a large ravine until the British squares were close by. He then launched his forces against the British in a desperate assault to close with them in hand-to-hand combat. He had little other choice as his force was almost bereft of firepower, possessing only some two hundred rifles. But the fierce bravery of his Ansar could not overcome the disciplined British firepower. The Ansar suffered 2,000 killed while the British lost 130 killed.

The British did not attempt to interfere further with operations in the Suakin area in 1884. The only remaining garrison in the area was Suakin itself. Osman Digna retained control of the remainder of the area despite the British victories. After each battle, the Mahdist forces were able to withdraw successfully. Osman Digna rejected all government demands for surrender or negotiation. His forces had suffered defeat, but he effectively controlled the province and had severed the strategic Suakin-Berber route to the interior of the Sudan. In line with their containment strategy, the British were content to hold Suakin itself with two battalions of well-entrenched infantry supported by heavy artillery and the guns of the Royal Navy offshore. On 3 April 1884, the

British evacuated General Graham's expeditionary force to Egypt. Osman Digna retained control of the strategic Suakin-Berber route to the interior of the Sudan. If the Egyptians were to evacuate the Sudan, the evacuation could not now occur through Suakin.



## CHAPTER 9

### KHARTOUM

Under British pressure, and nearly bereft of manpower the Khedive of Egypt had agreed to evacuate the Sudan after the defeat of the Hicks and Baker relief expeditions. The British agreed to help carry out the evacuation. London suggested General Charles Gordon of England. Gordon quickly left England and arrived in Cairo on 26 January 1884. He spent only two days in the Egyptian capitol before leaving for the Sudan, meeting with the British ministers and the Khedive before his departure. His destination was Khartoum, some 2,000 miles up the Nile. His mission was limited: evacuate the remaining Egyptian garrisons in the Sudan and turn over the government of the Sudan to the local Sudanese.

Gordon wanted to turn the Sudan over to Zebehr Pasha, the Khedive's original choice for Gordon's job. Zebehr was a native Sudanese who had conquered Darfur province and added it to Egyptian colonial rule as part of the Sudan. He was in Egypt under detention as a result of slave trading and political activities in the Sudan prior to the appearance of the Mahdi. However, the British government had blocked Zebehr's appointment, fearing public

opinion would turn against them if they backed the nomination of a famous slave trader.<sup>1</sup> Because the Khedive, at British insistence, had retained Zebehr in Egypt, Gordon was faced with conducting the evacuation while searching for a suitable candidate to assume the reigns of government.

Gordon arrived in Khartoum on 18 February 1884, after a 21 day journey from Cairo. The senior officer in Khartoum upon Gordon's arrival was Colonel Coetlogan. He had come to Khartoum with Hicks and had replaced Hicks as commandant of Khartoum. Colonel Coetlogan had already begun to prepare Khartoum for a siege. With the destruction of the Hicks' column the previous November, Khartoum's vulnerability to the Mahdi had become obvious. The Sennar province area immediately to the south of Khartoum was already in revolt and by now largely controlled by Mahdist forces, although the Mahdi himself had not yet moved out of Kordofan province against Khartoum.

By this time the Mahdi had expanded his activities beyond the command of a revolutionary army. He had also formed a revolutionary government. The Mahdi set up his government in accordance with Islamic tradition. He ran a treasury, a judicial system, and held audiences for his followers. He was also consolidating support for his cause and organizing his efforts for what lay ahead. Although he controlled a large military force and a good deal of territory with its attendant population, he was still personally isolated in Kordofan province from major events.

Although his base of operations in Kordofan was now secure from Egyptian reprisals, he had no way of knowing that from now on he clearly held the initiative. His victory over Hicks and the spread of the revolt to other parts of the Sudan had convinced the British to pressure the Khedive to cut his losses and withdraw from the Sudan. The Mahdi did not yet know this, but his efforts at exporting his religious views and spreading the Jihad were beginning to achieve substantial results.

His appointment of local notables such as Osman Digna as regional commander was not an isolated event. The Mahdi's use of subordinates to organize and lead the people in his revolt was extensive. He had long realized that he could not be everywhere and do everything himself. He delegated responsibilities effectively in his Jihad to overthrow the colonial Egyptian administration. More importantly, he established the basis for Sudanese nationalism by appointing subordinates from local tribes and providing them with political and military responsibilities.

Knowledge of local conditions and the use of local personages in the highly diverse Sudan were critical to the success of the Mahdist revolution. Osman Digna, like other Mahdist leaders, not only knew the people of the local area, he knew the people of influence. He was also a person of some repute in the area prior to the Mahdist revolution. The Mahdi's other appointees to lead the Jihad were from similar backgrounds and would achieve similar successes.

To the west, in Darfur province, the Mahdi appointed Sayed Mohammed Khaled. He was a native of the area and a local notable.<sup>2</sup> Sayed Mohammed Khaled successfully completed the overthrow of the colonial administration in Darfur on 15 January 1884 with the surrender of Darfur's provincial governor Rudolf Slatin. To the south, the Mahdi appointed the Emir Karamella. He too was a well known man and a native-born member of the local community.<sup>3</sup> He succeeded in obtaining the surrender of Bahr El Ghazal province by the provincial governor Lupton Bey on 28 April 1884. To the north, the Mahdi appointed Mohammed el Kheirt to conquer Berber province. A local emir,<sup>4</sup> he captured Berber province on 9 May 1884.

The Mahdi's only key subordinate commander who failed to capture a Sudanese province was Sayed Mahmud Ali. His efforts in Dongola were cut short by his death at the battle of Korti on 9 September 1884.<sup>5</sup> The failure of his forces in Dongola was probably due to its geographic proximity to Egypt, which enabled its governor, Mustapha Bey Yower, to maintain open supply lines.

To the east of Kordofan lay Khartoum. Here the Mahdi had appointed Mohammed Abu Girga as his subordinate. Although he would need the assistance of the Mahdi with the main army to achieve success, the surrounding area of Khartoum was largely under his control by the end of 1883.

The Mahdi also organized his main military force under subordinate leadership. Estimates of its true size

vary, but it was probably in the area of 50,000 Ansar.<sup>6</sup> The Mahdi organized his army into divisions for the first time during the siege of Khartoum. Each division of the army was recognized by the color of its flags. The Mahdi copied the flag color system of the Prophet Mohamed's armies: green, black, and red. Again, his actions in this instance demonstrated his constant use of religious symbols to legitimize his actions and inspire his subordinates. The Mahdi appointed Khalifa Abdallahi the overall Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces. He also entrusted him with the command of the Black Flags division. The Black Flags were composed of Ansar drawn from the western tribes of the Sudan. The Mahdi gave Khalifa Ali Wad Helu command of the Green Flags division. These forces were composed of Ansar primarily drawn from the areas south of Khartoum. The Mahdi gave the command of the Red Flags to Khalifa Mohammed Sheriff. These Ansar were drawn from the areas north of Khartoum.

The Mahdi began to review his armed forces in late 1883. The reviews allowed him to see the main body of his troops, and more importantly, allowed the soldiers to see their religiously inspired leader. The Mahdi's efforts at self-legitimization had been so successful that many of his soldiers believed he was divine. Military leaders have long used reviews as a means of instilling esprit in their men. For the Mahdi, these reviews were key military training events. Mahdist military success depended upon the ability

of the Ansar to close with their enemies in fearless human wave assaults. Such assaults required a high level of esprit and dedication in each individual soldier. The Mahdi's use of reviews was designed to build such esprit.

After the conquest of El Obeid, the Mahdi had standardized the uniform of his followers. They wore the simple white jibbah. The jibbah is a loose fitting, knee-length shirt which was the common dress of the poor of the Sudan.<sup>7</sup> The Mahdi himself wore this simple garment. His leadership example in this instance was a good indication of how well he knew his followers. Because the vast majority of his Ansar were the poor of the Sudan, his success at identifying with them strengthened their bonds. White is also the color of dress for the Pilgrim to Mecca. Again the Mahdi utilized religious symbology.

The Mahdi's efforts at organizing his base of power before leaving Kordofan province were interrupted by an offer from the new Governor General of the Sudan. Prior to his arrival in Khartoum, Gordon had written to the Mahdi offering him the position of Governor of Kordofan province.<sup>8</sup> With his correspondence he included a red robe of honor and a fez (a Turkish hat). Gordon's action was an attempt at peace. The Mahdi had now been at war with the colonial government for almost three years. He had started with nothing when combat was first initiated. He had been a poor man with 300 followers on Abba Island. Now he was faced with an offer of that would end the war, legitimize him in a

position of power, and provide him a luxurious living.

The Mahdi refused Gordon's offer. His refusal demonstrates the Mahdi's personal commitment to his cause.

I prayed in the mosque of El Obeid I should also pray in the mosque of Khartum, then in the mosque of Berber, then in the mosque of Mecca, then in the mosque of Jerusalem, then in the mosque of El Irak.'

An upstart or adventurer would probably not have refused such an offer. Although most people would find it hard to refuse a life of luxury, for the Mahdi it was a simple matter. He had refused the honors and spoils heaped upon him by his followers. He wore a simple jibbah, ate frugally, and lived a simple life. He sincerely believed in what he was doing and refused to compromise his principles.

Although negative or detracting references to the Mahdi's personal conduct exist, the overwhelming majority are remarks by his enemies and are explainable as part of a propaganda war. The most frequent detracting reference is the contention that the Mahdi was somehow corrupted by his appetite for women. None, however, are firsthand accounts by either his European prisoners or his followers. The Mahdi unquestionably had many concubines, but we do not know if he ever had more than the four wives allowed in the Koran. In the traditional life of the Arab world, marriage was often used as a tool to increase the ties of allegiance to one's followers.<sup>10</sup> The Mahdi's successor, the Khalifa Abdallahi, used marriage in such a manner. His harem would be the only two story building in Omdurman during his reign.

It is likely that the Mahdi also utilized marriage to increase his stature and to bond his followers more closely to him. The sincerity of his writings, to his friends and his enemies, as well as his simple lifestyle, also support this conclusion. His followers who published accounts of his activities certainly share this view, and their testimony provides vivid evidence of the Mahdi's tremendous success in developing a loyal, enthusiastic following.

Gordon also understood the importance of bonds between a leader and his followers and directed his efforts in this area. Together, they were a formidable opponent and very tough for the Mahdi to overcome. Upon his arrival at Khartoum, Gordon quickly took steps to publicize his attempts to alleviate the injustices that he believed were at the root of the Mahdi's support. He repealed the prohibition against slavery, cut the tax rate in half, freed political prisoners, and paid off government debts.<sup>11</sup> Despite military failures in attempting to destroy the Mahdi, these activities had finally begun to address the political reasons for the Mahdist revolt.

The Mahdi did not remain idle on the political or the propaganda front as he entered into his greatest campaign. He wrote Gordon explaining his religious philosophy and asking Gordon to join him.<sup>12</sup> The Mahdi reciprocated Gordon's gift of clothing. He sent Gordon a jibbah and returned the clothing Gordon had sent to him. Gordon also refused his gifts, and in March 1884 informed



the Mahdi that correspondence between them was no longer necessary. Gordon had written the Mahdi a second time while at Khartoum asking the Mahdi for a ten-month truce. The Mahdi refused. He held the initiative and had no intention of losing it. The Mahdi, as he had done during the siege at El Obied, also wrote a proclamation to the inhabitants of Khartoum. His proclamation urged the inhabitants to perform a hegira (flight), as he had done from Abba Island, and as the Prophet Mohammed had done, and come over to his side.<sup>13</sup> Again the Mahdi framed his argument in the religious symbology of the Prophet which he knew was acceptable to the Islamic peoples of the Sudan.

Although both sides had some successes in their political strategies, the Egyptian side made the mistake of announcing its intention of withdrawing from the Sudan.<sup>14</sup> For the native Sudanese, continued support for the colonial government, which had clearly been losing the military campaign against the Mahdist uprising, and was on the verge of evacuating the country, was becoming more illogical and risky. Relatively few would stand firm.

The majority of the population in the Sennar province area, the immediate vicinity of Khartoum, would choose to join the Mahdi's side. The people of Sennar were already in revolt by the time Gordon reached Khartoum. The Mahdist forces did not directly threaten Khartoum itself but controlled the countryside. Sheik El Obied and Sheik El Mudawwi were leading the revolt in Sennar and had already

achieved many local successes. They were sufficiently strong to approach the defenses of Khartoum and put it under direct pressure in March 1884.

Inside Khartoum Gordon had roughly 10,000 men available.<sup>15</sup> His artillery consisted of 21 guns and up to six Nordenfelt and Gatling machine-guns. He also possessed seven steamers which gave him the ability to use the Nile for offensive sorties. He was able to produce small arms ammunition and repair and even build more boats in the arsenal and shipyards of Khartoum. His principal disadvantage was the requirement to feed Khartoum's population of 40,000 people, under siege conditions.

Gordon's background made him a very capable commander of a besieged force. Originally commissioned in the British army as an engineer, Gordon was very knowledgeable in the techniques of siege warfare. He was also a very energetic man and spared no efforts to improve his position and withstand the siege until relief arrived. Gordon directed the planting of crops on the land he controlled to improve his food supply. He began improving existing defensive works and greatly strengthened the landward side of the Khartoum defenses. The land defenses eventually consisted of a rampart and ditch stretching from the White to the Blue Nile. Incorporated into the rampart were four strongpoints where he placed most of his artillery. Gordon utilized improvised mines made out of artillery shells to further strengthen his defenses. Across

the Nile, Fort Omdurman and North Fort protected the garrison against an attack by boat.

The local Ansar were not strong enough to mount a direct assault on Khartoum and did not make the attempt. Instead, they utilized the indirect approach. On 13 March they seized the town of al-Halfaya north of Khartoum and cut the government telegraph line. With the capture of al-Halfaya Mahdist forces incircled Khartoum. Gordon's counterattack with 4,000 men initially failed to retake al-Halfaya.

In March the Mahdi delivered his answer to Gordon. He dispatched Mohammed Abu Girga from El Obied with reinforcements to take charge of operations in Sennar and capture Khartoum. Initially, Abu Girga did not change the policy of the indirect approach, and he made no major effort to assault the city. The Mahdist forces focused on strengthening their positions while maintaining the siege.

Gordon knew that he could not sit passively awaiting outside reinforcements. He undertook offensive operations to keep the besieging forces off balance and to obtain food supplies. Throughout the summer months Gordon launched limited attacks against the Mahdists. By utilizing the steamers to travel the Nile and outflank his opponents, he met with some success. The Mahdists were unable to defeat the steamers with their limited firepower. Gordon armed the steamers with cannon and machineguns for his operations. The Mahdists had captured cannons from previous

battles but were untrained in their use and were at a severe disadvantage when engaged in artillery duels. To make up for their lack of training, the Mahdists' used captured government artillerymen by offering them their freedom if they would man the Mahdi's artillery.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the Mahdists never gained superiority in the artillery duels that occurred in the siege.

Gordon's offensive operations were generally successful when confined to the banks of the Nile where the government forces enjoyed vastly superior firepower. They recaptured Al-Halfaya in June and pushed back the Mahdists from the Nile. In August, Muhammad Ali Pasha Husayn led several successful sorties against the Mahdist forces along the Nile's banks. In September, attempting to exploit a victory along the river, he advanced inland. The Mahdists ambushed and routed his force, capturing 1,000 rifles at al Aylafuh on 4 September.

Gordon had planned to continue attacking to the north, hoping to break the siege and eventually to retake the province of Berber. The defeat of Muhammad Ali Pasha Husayn (referred to in several British accounts as The Fighting Pasha) convinced Gordon to cancel his plans. The initiative passed to the Ansar at exactly the time they were being heavily reinforced. They quickly retook al-Halfaya in late September.

The Mahdi's main army arrived in the Khartoum area in early September. On 23 October the Mahdi himself arrived

in the Khartoum area and established his headquarters at Abu Sad, south of Omdurman. As he approached Khartoum he opened communications with Gordon but Gordon refused the Mahdi's offers to surrender. The Mahdi continued to build on the strategy of the indirect approach. He directed the building of fortifications at al-Halfaya, and intensified the bombardment of Khartoum using captured artillery and captured enemy gunners.

The Mahdi directed his main effort against Fort Omdurman across the river from Khartoum. The Mahdist forces besieging the fort were primarily composed of ex-regulars.<sup>17</sup> These were the best trained men the Mahdi had in the use of the Remington rifle. The fort stood on high ground and could deliver effective artillery fire against attacking forces in support of the main defensive works. It also dominated the Nile, and its possession was key to control of steamer traffic on the Nile.

Prior to the Mahdi's arrival at Khartoum Gordon could freely move men to and from the fort. On 12 November, the Ansar isolated the fort from Khartoum's main defensive positions by attacking and seizing the narrow area between the fort and the river. Direct communications with Khartoum were now by signal flags only.

The Mahdi's tactics were to employ the divide and conquer approach to his siege operations. At El Obeid he had suffered a severe setback when he first attempted to assault the town. Khartoum was a much stronger position

than El Obeid and its garrison was much more formidable in both manpower and firepower. The Mahdi did not repeat the mistake of El Obeid by ordering an early all-out assault on Khartoum. He utilized his forces effectively to isolate the main garrison and strengthen his siege lines so that no reinforcement of men, food, or material could reach the defenders. He knew that time was on his side and that starvation would eventually bring about the fall of Khartoum. His campaign strategy on siege warfare had effectively incorporated the lessons learned from his earlier battles.

Fort Omdurman was the first position to succumb. The Ansar successfully blocked all attempts at resupplying the garrison with food and ammunition. The commander of the fort communicated his plight to Gordon on a regular basis. Gordon was clearly anxious over the fate of the fort. He knew the fort was key to the successful defense of Khartoum, and he was determined to hold the fort as long as possible. Finally, however, on the fifth of January 1885 Gordon allowed Fort Omdurman to surrender. He had been unable to clear the Ansar from the fort's supply lines and saw no benefit in forcing the fort's garrison to die at their posts due to starvation.

The Mahdi was content to await the surrender of the main garrison which he knew starvation would bring about. He had based his campaign for Khartoum on isolating and starving the defenders from the very outset. But now other

factors intervened. The British had dispatched a relief expedition to save Gordon.

The British government had convinced the Khedive to send Gordon to the Sudan to evacuate the remaining garrisons and establish indigenous Sudanese rule as a counter to the Mahdi. Gordon tried to comply with his orders. Prior to being cut off in Khartoum he evacuated 2,000 civilians and 600 soldiers from the Khartoum area. He failed to convince the Mahdi to agree to a truce or to find a suitable Sudanese to counter the Mahdi's influence. The Mahdi's success at isolating Gordon in Khartoum forced the British to choose between abandoning Gordon to the Mahdi or attempting to rescue him.

After much debate, the British government decided to mount a relief expedition. The Mahdist had cut the telegraph from Khartoum in March, and England knew little of the current situation. On 5 August 1884 Parliament approved 300,000 pounds to finance the expedition.<sup>18</sup> On 9 September, Lord Wolseley, the commander of the relief expedition, arrived in Cairo.

Because of Osman Digna's control of the Suakin-Berber area, and his own preference for riverine operations, Wolseley chose to reach Gordon and Khartoum via the Nile route.<sup>19</sup> The expeditionary force entrusted to Wolseley consisted of 6,000 men, including eight infantry battalions, a cavalry regiment, and a field artillery battery. Wolseley also formed a Camel Corps to proceed

along the Nile and cross the Bayuda Steppe via Jakdul Wells (see map on page 3). He formed the force from volunteers of British regiments in England not assigned to operations in the Sudan.

In order to transport the force down the Nile, the British built 800 boats, and gathered boatmen from Canada, West Africa, and Aden. The force's starting point was Sarass, the southern end of the rail line from Egypt. Sarass is located just south of Wadi Halfa along the Sudan frontier and is approximately 830 miles upriver from Khartoum.

On 6 November 1884, the first boat load of British soldiers began the advance down the Nile to Khartoum. On 12 November, the Camel Corps began its march along the Nile's banks to Khartoum.

The denial of the Suakin-Berber route to the British by Osman Digna's Mahdist forces gave the Mahdi additional time to carry on the siege of Khartoum. The British debated long and hard on the choice of routes to relieve Gordon. Without Osman Digna's firm possession of the Suakin area, a faster option would have been available to British planners.

The Camel Corps arrived in Korti on 14 December 1884. The lead element of the waterborne contingent arrived in Korti on 17 December. Thus far the advance had been unopposed. Korti was at the southern limit of the Egyptian government's effective control. From Korti, Wolseley sent



the Camel Corps across the desert via Jakdul Wells to Metemmeh on the Nile. However, the Camel Corps carried insufficient supplies to make the advance straight to Metemmeh and had to delay its advance in order to establish a supply base at Jakdul Wells. Accomplishing this, the column advanced from Jakdul Wells on 12 January 1885.

The Mahdi knew of the British attempt to relieve Khartoum and reinforced his forces in the northern region to delay the British relief expedition.<sup>20</sup> The Mahdi did not want to break off operations against Khartoum and realized the British advance represented a direct threat to his siege operations.

The first major action between the Mahdists and the relief expedition occurred on 17 January 1885. The Mahdists contested the Camel Corps' advance from Jakdul Wells at Abu Klea.

The Mahdist commander, Abu Saleh, led 11,500 men against the Camel Corps' 2,000. Abu Saleh failed in his attempt to ambush the British column. He gave away his position with poor fire discipline. Forewarned, the British advanced in square against the Mahdists. The Ansar attempted to rush the square but were mowed down by the disciplined British volleys. Abu Saleh was killed along with several of his key subordinates and approximately 1,100 of his men. The British lost 81 men killed, including their second in command, in the battle. The Mahdists were able to withdraw unpursued from the battlefield.

The British continued their advance after the battle. They paused shortly at Abu Klea to draw water from the wells and care for their 100 wounded. On 19 January they reached Abu Kru, four miles from the Nile.

The Mahdists had retreated to Metemneh after their first battle with the Camel Corps. They advanced against the British at Abu Kru, but did not attempt an assault. Instead, they harassed the British with rifle fire and sustained this action as the British advanced the four miles to the Nile's banks at the town of Gubat. These actions inflicted British casualties of 22 men killed and 92 wounded, including the British commander, General Sir Herbert Stewart, who was mortally wounded.<sup>21</sup>

Sir Charles Wilson, the column's intelligence officer, now took command of the Camel Corps. On 21 January, he attacked the Mahdists in Metemneh. The Mahdists held their position strongly, and Wilson called off his attack shortly after it had begun and withdrew to Gubat.

Gordon had dispatched four steamers from Khartoum to meet the relief forces he knew to be coming. They found the Camel Corps at Gubat on 21 January (five days prior to the fall of Khartoum). Sir Charles Wilson decided to attempt to rescue Gordon utilizing two of the steamers. He sailed upriver for Khartoum on 24 January with 20 British soldiers on board. One steamer struck a rock in the Nile at the sixth cataract and sank. On 28 January, Wilson, in the remaining steamer, came within sight of Khartoum and

realized the city had fallen. He had arrived two days too late to save Gordon. He turned back to Gubat.

The main body of the Relief Expedition, the Nile Column, commanded by Major-General W. Earle, made considerably slower progress in its boats than did the Camel Corps. Major-General Earle led the advance from Korti on 28 December 1884. They were unopposed until they reached Kirbekan on 10 February.

The 2,000 Mahdists opposed the advance force of 1,100 British of the Nile column. The Mahdists occupied a ridge and made no attempt at an attack. The British advanced and drove the Ansar from the field inflicting numerous casualties. The British lost only 12 men killed; however, Major-General Earle was among those slain.

Sir Garnet Wolseley, who had obeyed his orders to remain headquartered at Korti, allowed the Nile column to continue to advance until 24 February. On that day the Nile Column began its retreat to Korti. With Gordon dead, the British government no longer had any desire to continue military operations in the Sudan. The Nile column arrived in Korti on 16 March. Sir Charles Wilson, after returning from his attempt to save Gordon at Khartoum, began the retreat of the Camel Corps on 6 February. The Camel Corps arrived back in Korti in early March.

The Mahdi had successfully delayed the relief expedition and could now complete the siege of Khartoum. Although he dispatched reinforcements north to help delay

the relief column, he did not give up his siege operations. His forces correctly determined that the much faster Camel Corps was the greatest threat and major focus for their efforts, and did not contest the advance of the Nile Column until after the Camel Corps had begun its retreat.

The Mahdi was aware that the relief expedition could ruin his plans. He had excellent reconnaissance information on the progress of the British relief column, and knew that he could not maintain the siege indefinitely.

After the fall of Fort Omdurman, he wrote to Gordon on 12 January 1885 calling on him to surrender Khartoum.

The Mahdi's final offer to Gordon to surrender illustrates the Mahdi's preferred use of the diplomatic option. He offered Gordon the option of safe passage to the Relief Expedition. The Mahdi made the offer to Gordon because he wished to save him from the destruction that the Prophet had shown him would shortly overtake Khartoum. He was prepared to send Gordon to the British without claiming the 20,000-pound reward offered by the British for his safe return. He would not even accept five pieces of silver.<sup>22</sup>

With Gordon's refusal to surrender the city and the approach of the British Relief Expedition, the Mahdi decided to assault the garrison. In order to achieve surprise and simultaneously limit the defenders' superiority in firepower, the assault took place at night. The Ansars' major attack was directed at the weakest section of the defensive works. The seasonal receding of the Nile had

exposed flat ground and weakened the effectiveness of the ditch and rampart fortification system along the waters edge. Shortly before dawn on 26 January 1885, the Ansar assaulted Khartoum along the banks of the White Nile. They quickly overran the defenses and captured the city. Despite the Mahdi's orders to take Gordon alive, the Ansar killed Gordon and brought his head to the Mahdi.

The conquest of Khartoum eliminated nearly all Egyptian military opposition to the Mahdi's rule outside of Berber and Suakin. The 40,000 strong Egyptian military force which had garrisoned the Sudan at the time of the outbreak of the revolt had been destroyed. In the absence of further British military intervention, the Mahdi was effectively the ruler of the Sudan.

On 30 January 1885 the Mahdi entered Khartoum. He came to the city to lead the prayers in the mosque. After the completion of prayers he addressed his followers. He asked them for forgiveness because the Ashraf (members of his family, again copied from the term utilized by the Prophet to refer to his family) had been tempted by the riches captured at Khartoum. He asked that all the faithful pray three times, so that the Ashraf might learn the fallacy of their ways.<sup>23</sup> There was no victory speech to the crowd. The Mahdi was more concerned with moral issues than he was of boasting of his accomplishments.

The Mahdi abandoned Khartoum. He directed his army and all the people in the vicinity to build a new capital

across the White Nile just south of Fort Omdurman. The Mahdi occupied a newly constructed simple house in his new capital. He did not have much time to rule the Sudan.

Six months later, on 22 June 1885, the Mahdi died. The cause of his death is believed to be typhus.<sup>24</sup> Little is written or known of his activities between the capture of Khartoum and his death. The Khalifa Abdallahi succeeded the Mahdi as the ruler of the Sudan.

The Khalifa engaged in war with Egypt and Abyssinia during his reign. He instigated both wars by embarking on an invasion of both countries. The Khalifa's struggle to establish a perfect Islamic community was unsuccessful. He was defeated in both wars.

The Khalifa ruled the Sudan until his defeat by an Anglo-Egyptian force at the battle of Omdurman in 1898. The Anglo-Egyptians then reinstituted a colonial government in the Sudan that lasted until 1954.

## CHAPTER 10

### CONCLUSION

The most important reason why the Mahdist revolution succeeded was because of the Mahdi's effective leadership. Leadership is the process of influencing others to accomplish the mission by providing purpose, direction, and motivation.<sup>1</sup> His leadership did exactly that. He began his leadership success by supplying the people with a vision. Vision is the key to all that must be accomplished.<sup>2</sup> The Mahdi's vision was simple and attractive to his followers. His vision was the establishment of a just Islamic community. He never strayed from that vision or let anything stand in its way. The Mahdi was very consistent with his actions and repeated his message at every opportunity. He called the people to Jihad against the "Turks", and all those who stood in the way of establishing that community.

The Mahdi set the standard of behavior in the pursuit of his vision. He placed nothing above its attainment and he dedicated his life to accomplishing the mission. He identified himself with his warriors by wearing the same simple dress that they wore. He ate frugally and maintained a modest home, never appearing above the status

of his followers. In public appearances the Mahdi was very effective. Even Slatin says "he stood with all humility before his followers." His ability to impress an educated, former enemy in such a profound manner is little short of extraordinary. The effect on the poor and uneducated of the Sudan, who were more predisposed towards the Mahdi, must have been almost spellbinding. The Mahdi was a charismatic leader to his followers. Both Osman Digna and Babikr Bedri remained affected by the Mahdi throughout their lives, even many years after his death. In their writings they constantly bless his memory and his deeds. His vision and his unwavering support of that vision were the main cause of the revolution's success.

The Mahdi pursued his vision by reaching across tribal lines when appointing subordinates to positions of importance. Because a national identity did not exist among his people, he was unable to use this appeal to gain support. Instead, he had to build trust and support among divergent tribal elements in order to be successful. His actions indicate he understood that requirement and was able to develop a successful coalition by his even-handed treatment of all segments of society. Islam was both the basis for his revolution and the glue for the coalition. The Mahdi's ability to articulate his vision and his personal example strengthened this bond.

As his following grew, the Mahdi found it necessary to establish an economic plank to his revolutionary



ideology. He was able to build a solid framework for success in the economic field based on his religious tolerance and the actions of the colonial administration. His religion did not condemn slavery, but allowed its practice. The Mahdi benefited from this position both on the economic and the cultural level. He did nothing to interfere with the practice of slavery.

He established the Beit el Mal to handle financial matters. He based his collection system on that of the Prophet to cover the distribution of booty taken during the revolution. No Muslim could argue with the fairness of this system.

The Mahdi clearly won the hearts and minds of the people in his revolutionary war. His effective use of propaganda and his constant self-identification with the Prophet gave him far more legitimacy than the colonial regime he fought. He strove to point out the benefits of joining a just cause. He used his propaganda to gain friends and win the people under colonial control over to his side. He realized the colonial government needed the people just as much as he did and was untiring in his efforts to win them over. His correspondence and proclamations were a major contributing factor to his early rapid growth and eventual success.

In the military field, the Mahdi lacked formal education and training but was familiar with the military endeavors of the Prophet. Nevertheless, he established a

good enough track record to ensure the success of his movement.

He understood the concept of initiative and included it in his strategy by establishing simultaneous threats to his enemy throughout the Sudan. He strove to keep the enemy off balance and in constant reaction to his moves. He also kept his focus on the objective and would not let go until he had accomplished the mission. He demonstrated both these concepts by reinforcing his subordinates to allow them to take the offensive or to delay a relieving force.

The Mahdi knew the value of surprise on the battlefield. The Mahdi utilized reconnaissance and successfully denied the enemy reconnaissance on the battlefield. He was victorious in all of his early battles thanks to achieving surprise. He destroyed the Hicks column with surprise, and finally he conquered Khartoum with a surprise attack.

The Mahdi learned from his mistakes in the military arena. He learned the value of firepower and what it meant on the battlefield and changed his policy about the use of captured weapons. He learned the prohibitive cost of assaulting defended positions and instituted siege warfare to overcome defended positions. When forced to assault, he negated the enemy's advantage by a surprise attack at night.

In the critical areas of legitimacy, leadership, economic policy, and military strategy the Mahdi succeeded. He overcame the obstacles in his path to establish his

vision of an Islamic state. His efforts in leading a successful revolutionary struggle remain largely obscure in the western world. The story of the Mahdist revolution is well worth the attention of professional soldiers and diplomats. The many lessons available from a study of the Mahdist revolution have a direct and important relevance in the contemporary resurgence of religiously inspired popular revolutions.

## CHAPTER 11

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The majority of literature written on the Mahdist revolution is military history. It was written primarily by British participants of the campaign. It is necessarily limited in scope due to a lack of access to the opposing side. It does, however, present many excellent firsthand accounts of the battles and campaigns that occurred.

After the close of the first campaign in 1885, the Egyptian Military Department attempted to gather as much material as possible on the Mahdists. This took on added significance as the British and Egyptians began to prepare for the second campaign in 1896. The main contribution of this work was to add considerably to the previous lack of detailed knowledge of the climate and geography of the Sudan. It also added to our knowledge of the ethnic makeup of the Sudan.

A second group of writers emerged between the two campaigns. These were the Europeans who had escaped from the Mahdist forces. Rudolf C. Slatin (Slatin Pasha) is the most renowned and his Fire and Sword in the Sudan added immensely to our knowledge of the Mahdist side.

Access to Mahdist material did not come about until the close of the second campaign in 1898 with the capture of the Mahdist capitol of Omdurman. The British safeguarded the writings of the Mahdi and shipped them to Cairo. They were returned to the Sudan in 1915, and are today in Khartoum.

With the close of the second campaign and the total defeat of the Mahdists, the Mahdist documents were largely ignored. Again, the vast majority of literature written after this campaign reflected the views of British participants of the campaign. Winston Churchill's The River War is among the most famous.

Gradually, twentieth century scholars began to take interest in the Mahdist revolt. Pierre Crabites' Gordon The Sudan and Slavery is such an example. By the 1950s the Mahdists had again achieved legitimacy in the Sudan and scholars began to take an active interest in the Mahdist material in Khartoum. P. M. Holt's The Mahdist State in the Sudan was written with extensive use of Mahdist material and many interviews with the surviving Mahdists of the revolutionary period.

The Sudanese themselves have recently emerged in studies of the Mahdist period. Ismat Hasan Zulfo's Karari was a best-seller in Arabic before being translated into English. The book focuses on the later Mahdist period but it gives a good background of the earlier revolutionary time

frame. Ismat Zulfo is also a major in the Sudanese Army and schooled in military theory.

The increased awareness of Islam as a result of media and academic attention focused on the Arab-Israeli wars and the Iranian revolution has sponsored many works. Peters' Islam and Colonialism and Kelsay and Johnson's Just War and Jihad both study the Mahdist period. The vast majority of English language articles written on the Mahdia are found in British newspapers and magazines. They were written primarily during the Mahdist period. Several articles have since appeared in military journals and magazines. The Colonial Conquest describes itself as the magazine for the colonial wargamer and historical reader.

At least three theses have been written on the Mahdist time period. The ones that I am aware of are all written by Arab scholars. They are primarily focused on the military aspects of the Mahdist time period.

## ENDNOTES

### Chapter 2

1. Pierre Crabites, Gordon The Sudan and Slavery (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1933), 3.  
Richard Hill, Egypt in the Sudan 1820-1881 (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 7.
2. Donald Featherstone, Khartoum 1885 (London: Osprey Publishing Ltd, 1993), 7.
3. Hill, Egypt in the Sudan 1820-1881, 35.
4. Ibid., 154.
5. Babikr Bedri, The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), iv.  
As explained by P. M. Holt in the introduction to this work.
6. Michael Barthorp, War on the Nile (London: Blandford Press, 1984), 77.

### Chapter 3

1. P. M. Holt, The Mahdist State in the Sudan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 21.  
J. Spencer Trimingham, Islam in the Sudan (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), 93.
2. Rudolf C. Slatin, Fire and Sword in the Sudan (London: Edward Arnold, 1896), 124.  
Trimingham, Islam in the Sudan, 94.  
Slatin presents the Mahdist version of the Mahdi's break with his shaykh as related to him while a Mahdist prisoner. Trimingham presents the shaykh's version.

3. Slatin, Fire and Sword in the Sudan, 125.
4. Hill, Egypt in the Sudan 1820-1881, 1.

#### Chapter 4

1. Trimingham, Islam in the Sudan, 94.
2. Slatin, Fire and Sword in the Sudan, 136.
3. Featherstone, Khartoum, 9.
4. Slatin, Fire and Sword in the Sudan, 138.
5. Sir Francis R. Wingate, Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan 2d ed. (London: Frank Case and Company Limited, 1968), 65.
6. Ibid., 40.
7. Featherstone, Khartoum, 8.
8. Slatin, Fire and Sword in the Sudan, 143.
9. Gordon's journal relates many tales of former Egyptian army soldiers captured by the Mahdist forces and incorporated into their army. Gordon came to know many of these men who deserted the Mahdi's forces at the siege of Khartoum and rejoined their former comrades.
10. Bedri, The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri, 23.
11. Wingate, Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan, 44.  
The actual quote from the Mahdi is taken from a letter found in the Letter-Book of al-Nujumi. The Letter Book is an unpublished source consisting of a private collection of transcribed letters and proclamations of the Mahdi and the Khalifa captured at the battle of Tushki in 1889.
12. Holt, The Mahdist State in the Sudan, 126.



## Chapter 6

1. Slatin, Fire and Sword in the Sudan, 171.
2. W. Melville Pimblett, Story of the Soudan War (London: Remington and Co., 1885), 25.
3. Slatin, Fire and Sword in the Sudan, 173.

## Chapter 7

1. Featherstone, Khartoum, 8.
  2. Pimblett, Story of the Soudan War, 43.
  3. Slatin, Fire and Sword in the Sudan, 238.
  4. Holt, The Mahdist State in the Sudan, 126.
- This quote is taken from the work of Dr. Muhammad Ibrahim Ahmad Abu Salim. Dr. Salim published the Manshurat al-Iman al-Mahdi. The Manshurat is a collection of Mahdist works gathered by the Khalifa in Omdurman after the Mahdi's death.

## Chapter 8

1. Pimblett, Story of the Soudan War, 55.
  2. Wingate, Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan, 92.
  3. Osman Digna clearly shows an attitude of great respect for the Mahdi in his biography written in 1923.
  4. Barthorp, War on the Nile, 83.
  5. Ibid., 86.
- Featherstone, Khartoum, 43.
- Kipling's poem "Fuzzy-Wuzzy" was inspired by the actions of the Hadendowa tribesmen in the battle of Second El Teb.

## Chapter 9

1. Barthorp, War on the Nile, 83.  
Lord Elton, General Gordon's Khartoum Journal, (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1961), 15.  
Pimblett, Story of the Soudan War, 148.
2. Slatin, Fire and Sword in the Sudan, 262.
3. Ibid., 275.
4. Ibid., 302.
5. Pimblett, Story of the Soudan War, 211.  
Slatin, Fire and Sword in the Sudan, 303.  
Then Major Kitchner (later to be the victor at Omdurman and first Governor General of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan) was in Dongola province and working with the provincial colonial governor at the time of the battle.
6. Slatin, Fire and Sword in the Sudan, 300.
7. Featherstone, Khartoum, 33.  
Wingate, Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan, 60.  
The Mahdi's proclamation of the jibbah as the prescribed uniform of his Ansar is published in Wingate's book. It is from the Letter Book of al-Nujumi.
8. Featherstone, Khartoum, 53.
9. Wingate, Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan, 60.
10. Conversation with Dr. George Gawrych on 20 January 1994.
11. Barthorp, War on the Nile, 88.  
Pimblett, Story of the Soudan War, 143.
12. Wingate, Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan, 111.
13. Ibid., 65.

14. Barthorp, War on the Nile, 88.  
Pimblett, Story of the Soudan War, 142.

15. Gordon's journal gives his strength on 19 October 1884 as 8,665. This figure is after the disastrous battle of El Efuian in which Gordon states he lost 1,000 men. Several other much smaller actions occurred between this journal entry and Gordon's arrival at Khartoum. Discounting desertions and withdrawals I firmly believe that a figure of 10,000 men was available to Gordon at the commencement of the siege. Gordon's journal entry does count 692 enrolled inhabitants of Khartoum in his 19 October entry.

16. Slatin, Fire and Sword in the Sudan, 133.

17. Elton, General Gordon's Khartum Journal, 180.

18. Barthorp, War on the Nile, 93.

19. Wolseley commanded the Red River Expedition in Canada in 1870 and believed that in undeveloped areas water transport was the best mode of transport.

20. Featherstone, Khartoum, 64.

21. Garnett Joseph Wolseley, In Relief of Gordon, (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated Universities Presses, Inc., 1970), 133.

Wolseley's 4 February 1885 journal entry states casualties for the Camel Corps as totalling 111 KIA, and 193 WIA.

22. Holt, The Mahdist State in the Sudan, 112.  
This information is taken from the letter written by the Mahdi as found in Dr. Salim's Manshurat al-Iman al-Mahdi and quoted by Dr. Holt in his work.

23. Bedri, The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri, 33.

24. Holt, The Mahdist State in the Sudan, 104.

## Chapter 10

1. U.S. Army, FM 22-100. Military Leadership  
(Washington: Department of the Army, 1990), 1.

2. U.S. Army, FM 22-103. Leadership and Command at Senior Levels (Washington: Department of the Army, 1987), 5.

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